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ABSTRACT

Two trends that from the national point of view of the role of trustees demand attention are: (1) that higher education is in the process of reorganization and (2) that higher education must now answer questions concerning objectives and whether or not these objectives are paying off. Four responses to these issues in terms of national policy are: (1) encourage an open and vigorous debate on where education is going and what accountability of higher education means; (2) decide whether a centralized or decentralized system of higher education is necessary; (3) represent the institutions of higher education in a new way to the broader general public; and (4) represent public concerns to the institution. (Author/MJM)

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Trustee Accountability and National Policy

Frank Newman

Whether you agree or disagree with the concept of an education market, I think it is part of your role as trustees to think about and to develop the mechanisms of governance for the total system. . . . Now there is a new responsibility to make a strong case for higher education.

Because trustees are members of "the Establishment" you know that one of the important things about higher education's being in trouble is that trouble is not a function of higher education alone. Many institutions in American society are in trouble – hospitals are in trouble, unions are in trouble. Considering the climate we face today in higher education, we should be generating a renewed public trust in us. From the national point of view of the role of trustees I would argue that there are two very troubling trends which demand our attention.

I

The first is that higher education is in the process of reorganization. It is a reorganization that has bee.. going on without much notice and it affects both the accountability of the institutions and their mission historically. The missions of institutions and the roles of the trustees were more easily defined at their inception. The original mission of Harvard was simply to turn out good Puritans for the clergy. The University of Virginia was founded to train an elite for Virginia, West Point to train officers for the army, and Hampton Institute to train black professionals. New forces are changing much of that.

First of all, higher education is becoming much more public; today roughly 76 percent is public and 24 percent is private. Simultaneously

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with the changing of the ratio of public to private, there has been a trend toward the multicampus system of the public domain. It is important to recognize that the nature of the multicampus system itself is a massive and fundamental reorganization of American higher education. The fundamental unit until the middle 1960's was the individual campus under the control of the individual president whom we had revered in the past as a man of unchallenged authority, kindly demeanor, with absolute authority over the faculty, and having the respect of the public. It is hard to think of any of those concepts being left in the 1970's.

Concurrent with the rise of the multicampus system, which has organized higher education into a bureaucracy, has been the rise of state level administration. These are increasingly exerting control and influence over not only public higher education but private higher education as well. Whereas before there were generally single, specific missions for institutions, there are increasingly general missions for them. Whereas there was a narrow constituency in the founding of most colleges – public and private – there is now a very broad constituency. It formerly was easy to tell the mission and constituency of a place like Hotsburgh Teacher College; today it is extraordinarily difficult to decide who is the clientele and what is the mission of the State University of New York.

As a result, the role of the trustee is undergoing a fundamental change. It is to the trustee that we look for accountability. An easy way to see this is to think of accountability as being an equation where the different variables represent competing influences which will affect the directions which an institution will take. There is no single accountability to the "public" which can be viewed as either a narrow public such as the Puritans or as a broader public like the state of New York, or California or Oregon. There is also a complex measure of responsibility to government in the accountability equation. Government at all levels is pluralistic. When one says that an institution is responsible to the state of New York it does not mean just to the governor, the legislature, committees, or the board of regents. New York is itself pluralistic and the federal government is pluralistic. There is a responsibility to the bureaucracies that are growing up – the multicampus system and the statewide board agencies. There is a responsibility, obviously, to students and there is a responsibility to faculty.

As the organizational structure of higher education changes it alters the weights in the equation. In the 1950's, institutions, particularly the major universities, reached a point where they were more or less self-accountable. The faculty weight in that equation became the dominant weight. The trustees during that period were not terribly strong in directing the fortunes and the

directions of institutions. That was a period of weak trusteeship and universities were inner-directed rather than externally directed. Now, I would argue, the equation is beginning to overbalance in the direction of the bureaucracies. Increasingly the interest and attention of people at the campus is devoted to resolving issues that are presented to them from the office above. I would also argue that each institution should have a different balance in that equation. One of the difficulties of the organization pattern to which we are moving is the tendency for the equation to have the same balance for all. I am not arguing that there is a desire within the coordinating boards or in the home offices of multicampus systems to create a sameness. In fact, many of them have gone out of their way to avoid uniformity by creating non-traditional types of institutions. There is a problem, though, in any bureaucratic operation in that people within the operation tend to project upward the rational responses that they think are desired of them. We should be extraordinarily concerned about this tendency, otherwise institutions will become accountable to decision makers who are not closely coupled to the teaching and learning process and who are not necessarily closely coupled to the public's needs, either.

We tend to assume that since bureaucracy in higher education is populated with young persons that vigorous, energetic people will populate positions of management in the future, that the same kind of driving people who built the great multicampus institutions will, in fact, be their managers downstream. Our task force has concluded that gradually there will be a change in the type of people involved; the dynamic mavericks who tend to build such organizations will be squeezed out and we will find ourselves more and more with middle-level management, as opposed to college presidents in the old sense, running campuses.

Another concern which requires attention is the tendency inherent in such a setup for political jockeying. Many issues are decided on the basis of political clout rather than substantive value. There is also a tendency to pit one factor against another – one multicampus system against another multicampus system, public against private, state versus federal interest, four-year colleges versus community colleges – often in a terribly painful way. One need only look back to those marvelous battles in North Carolina or Wisconsin or several other states as some of these issues were resolved to see how painful such struggles can be. They are far from the kind of reflective concern that we have always prided ourselves on in higher education. Most important, we may well reach the point of rigidity where it is very difficult either to arrive at evolutionary change or to back up toward some other system.

One of the things that tends to happen in a large multicampus system is that as decisions drift up-

ward and away from the campus there is a tendency for unions to form. The faculty is frustrated when it is unable to obtain direct answers from the president who is no longer able to give them. The faculty increasingly is turning to its own bureaucracy, with the result that there is a system-wide sandwich in which the administrative bureaucracy and the union bureaucracy face each other and the teaching-learning process and the student-faculty relationships are squeezed inexorably between.

II

The second trend which will make life more complicated at the trustee level is that we have come to the end of what one of my colleagues calls the rhetorical era. Higher education in this country has always existed in a sort of "atmosphere of faith." We have had such fundamental beliefs in the values of higher education and in its nature that we have been able to exist without asking ourselves any embarrassing questions. As higher education has grown larger – we now spend three percent of the nation's gross national product on it – this is harder to do. When one is spending over thirty billion dollars it gets harder and harder to avoid questions concerning what we are doing and whether or not it is paying off.

We used to say that one of the most important things about American higher education was that there should be access for everyone, but then we quietly measured on the basis of academic ability and, one way or another, admitted those who met the conditions of merit. We used to say that liberal arts was the great enduring value of higher education in learning how to think, learning how to be a better citizen, but increasingly we quietly interjected to students that the most important value is that you will get a good job if you complete your degree. Yesterday I received a mailer put out by the director of the Veterans Administration which once again made the argument, "Take advantage of your GI Bill because you will earn $273,000 more in your lifetime." There are two faults in this statement: it is patently untrue (all the evidence indicates that anybody who is likely to make more money is likely to do so whether or not he goes to college), and it completely subverts the argument we have been making about liberal arts. Also, while we have said that the prime purpose of the university is to be a place for education, we have concentrated on the process of research.

Now we are being asked not simply about access, but access to what, for how long, at whose expense, and to what purpose? In the egalitarian era, who should get access to scarce resources? Who, for example, in a period when entrance to medical school means significant income over a lifetime should be afforded access to the medical schools? These have become choices of real significance to society; they are grave

issues of equity to the institutions. They are now issues of success and failure, whereas before it was just a question of who would get a slightly larger share of an ever-growing pie.

These questions have great relevance to your responsibilities in determining future directions in higher education, and these questions may become increasingly difficult to answer. There is a grave danger that we will arrive at simplistic solutions to what are obviously very complicated issues. In a situation where it is unclear how funds should be allocated, superficial solutions tend to prevail. One often hears arguments for a leveling process – every institution spending exactly the same amount, every student getting a certain amount based on need. Others advocate resource distribution based on simplistic criteria such as teaching load – presumably a measure of faculty productivity.

What should be our response to these issues in terms of national policy?

1. I believe we should be encouraging an open and vigorous debate on where we are going and what accountability of higher education means in a society such as ours. Many people in higher education seem to take great joy from the confusion that reigns about these issues and seem to be prepared to continue to leave us in a state of obscurity. I have always found it remarkable how little serious discussion and analysis there has been of the choices facing higher education. We have discussed the imminence of disaster – that is apparent if you read any higher education literature – but very little has been said about what we are going to do about it. Winston Churchill once said there are men in the world who derive as much joy and exultation from the proximity of disaster and ruin as others do from success. I think we have an abnormal share of those people in higher education.

Despite this I frankly think that this is a period of great opportunity. However, if we are to regain the positive public support that we have had in the past, higher education must break free from the conventional wisdom and examine itself more critically. I think there is now a very unusual but fleeting opportunity for evolutionary change and reform in the structures of higher education. I think a new set of directions can be established. After that, if American traditions prevail, the calm of business as usual will return and the opportunity for constructive change will pass. Therefore, we should take this opportunity to engage in the most vigorous possible debate and discussion.

2. In terms of national policy I think we have to confront a very fundamental choice: do we want a centralized system of a decentralized system of higher education? There are endless choices that bear on this. Let me name a few that have come

up within the last few years. What is the role of revenue sharing in higher education? Is the role of the federal government to direct everything back to state agencies or is its role to be that of an active participant? This is a serious question as yet unresolved. What is the role of coordination between institutions? This is a discussion that has hardly begun and very few have really thought extensively about its implications. In New York it was recently proposed that private higher education should be coordinated with and by public institutions because public institutions were established by law to have the public responsibility. That is an extraordinary position in American higher education and it has been put forward with a good deal of force and vigor. The private institutions have hardly raised their voices as to whether they agree or disagree with this and, in my opinion, such an absolutely fundamental question should be debated at length.

Personally, I am skeptical about the idea of central coordination of higher education. Is there any evidence that a centrally directed effort in any form in any area of the social services in the United States has worked well? I don't think so. Our experience with elementary and secondary education is that the larger and more centrally coordinated a system becomes, the less well it works. I favor, and I think my colleagues in the task force favor, thinking seriously about how to create more of a free market structure in education. This might produce the kinds of incentives that encourage each institution to fulfill a responsible, responsive role within a broader system of higher education. One must create hard responsibilities both for the campus so that it will be effective and attract students that match its own mission, and for students so that they will choose wisely among various institutions and careers, and among alternative times of life for attendance.

Whether you agree or disagree with the concept of an education market, I think it is part of your role as trustees to think about and to develop the mechanisms of governance for the total system. I am not referring to internal governance within the campus – that is another issue entirely – I mean the relationship between institutions in the higher education system. Who else but trustees have such a clear responsibility? Who else is reasonably objective?

3. There is yet another new role of the trustees and that is to represent the institutions of higher education to the public in a new way. Trustees have been accustomed to representing the public institutions to the legislature and the private institutions to alumni in their quest for funds. I think there is a new responsibility and that is to the broader general public. In the past we never worried about that because the public was assumed to be in our corner simply because we were higher education. Now there

is a new responsibility to make a strong case for higher education.

4. I think there is a new responsibility for trustees to represent public concerns to the institution. I think it is crucial that the demands of the public flow into the institution in a way that forces the institution to examine and concern itself with the broader needs of the public. For example, in the period when graduate education was being expanded with little concern for its relationship to the general needs of the country, I think the trustees had an unusual responsibility to be critical. In a period when medical schools became increasingly concerned with research and began to ignore the question of medical practice, I think the trustees had a responsibility to question that policy. Whatever the new problems of tomorrow may be I think trustees have a responsibility to ensure that the management of the institutions is reviewed in the interest of the broad general public. All of this puts demands on trustees that are different in the seventies from what they were in the fifties.

Above all, I would argue that all of us — trustees, administrators, faculty — ought to get off the defensive. We have the greatest higher education system in the world. I see no reason why we should be wringing our hands about the nature of the future or worrying whether we are guilty of great sins in the past. We have concentrated on proving that we are on death's door rather than emphasizing the merits of our system and our willingness to admit past errors so that we can proceed with improving reforms and innovations. My own sense is that we have a great opportunity. This country does very well once it recognizes that a problem exists. There is no question in my mind but that there is strong, deep public support for higher education. When we openly debate any issue such as the future of higher education, there is almost always a saving common sense, a victory for reason and decency. We ought, therefore, to have the courage to examine our flaws, to think hard about the structure of higher education, to ask the very difficult questions of equity, to deal openly and honestly with what we can do and cannot do, and to have confidence that we can survive the debate, and that the public will recognize the value of higher education. This does not require that we possess all the answers, but it does require us to have a good deal of energy and verve. There is a verse from the First Corinthians which is appropriate: "For if the trumpet give forth an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?" Trustees, you are Gabriel.